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ABSTRACT

This policy statement focuses on educators' responsibility to provide programs that meet the needs of young children and their families. The statement is a call to action, urging the development of direct, creative, and expanded assistance that would not only help individual families, but would also be sound national policy. Listed are principles underlying recommended strategies. Strategies described include: (1) providing high-quality early childhood services to all children, with a concentration of public resources on programs for children at risk; (2) strengthening capacities of families; (3) assuring standards of quality for early childhood programs; and (4) collaborating to provide comprehensive services to young children and families. Concluding remarks assert that chief state school officers are ready to join with families, colleagues, policymakers, and the public to implement these strategies. (RH)

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EARLY CHILDHOOD & FAMILY EDUCATION

FOUNDATIONS FOR SUCCESS

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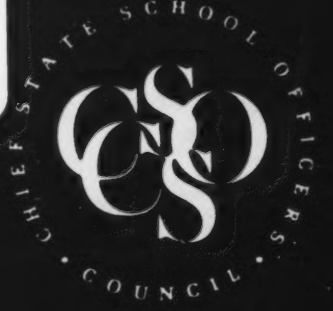

A STATEMENT ADOPTED NOVEMBER 1988

PS 017868

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) is a nationwide non-profit organization of the 57 public officials who head departments of public education in every state, the District of Columbia, the Department of Defense Dependent Schools, and five extra-state jurisdictions. CCSSO seeks its members' consensus on major education issues and expresses their views to civic and professional organizations, to federal agencies, to Congress, and to the public. Through its structure of standing and special committees, the Council responds to a broad range of concerns about education and provides leadership on major education issues.

Because the Council represents the chief education administrator, it has access to the educational and governmental establishment in each state and to the national influence that accompanies this unique position. CCSSO forms coalitions with many other education organizations and is able to provide leadership for a variety of policy concerns that affect elementary and secondary education. Thus, CCSSO members are able to act cooperatively on matters vital to the education of America's young people.

The CCSSO Resource Center on Educational Equity provides services designed to achieve equity in education for minorities, women and girls, and for disabled, limited English proficient, and low-income students. The Center is responsible for managing and staffing a variety of CCSSO leadership initiatives to provide better educational services to children and youth at risk to school success.

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Early Childhood & Family Education

Call for Action

Our concern is for young children and what society must do to assist them in developing their infinite capacities. Our focus is on the partnership of family, health and other care givers, and educators who need to help each child develop those capacities. Our challenge is to assure the partnership is in place and prepared to nurture each child from the earliest moments of life.

This statement of our commitment as educators addresses our colleagues who teach; policymakers in localities, states, and the nation; those who provide education and other caring services; and leaders of community, business, and labor. It is a call to come together at a time of profoundly changed and changing family and societal patterns to create new ways of supporting families and assuring that each child's earliest years provide the foundation for a creative life.

The Imperative

There is no more essential or more sensitive challenge before us than to create new partnerships and shared responsibilities for the development of young children. No participant can be successful alone in this task, but each has obligations and opportunities. However, this statement focuses on the responsibilities of educators, beginning with the need to help the public understand why early childhood and family education should be strengthened.

Families are the first and most continuous teachers. In the past, children entered the formal education system when it was believed they were ready to leave the constant care of parents and were prepared for an expanded learning environment. During the child's earliest years, the parents' role and the attention of schools existed independent of each other.

The world of children has changed in many ways. The time available to families for nurturing their children has diminished dramatically. Economic pressures on families cause young children to be placed in other care giving envi-

ronments much earlier. Further, much more is now known about patterns and periods of early learning and what stimulations and direction are most appropriate.

The dichotomy between nurturing and education has been blurred beyond distinction both because of the unprecedented societal changes affecting the very young and because we know good care for young children promotes learning and good learning experiences are caring and nurturing. We know families never cease being teachers; we also have learned that teachers must consider the total well-being of the children they teach.

Our values and institutions hold that each child should have the opportunity to develop to his or her fullest. That vision remains clear. However, that opportunity is imperiled. Our society must strengthen its commitments and change its services and institutions to address the realities facing our children and families.

These realities for the nearly four million infants born in 1988 are:

- Fifty percent will have mothers entering or re-entering the work force before their babies are one year old;
- Seventy percent will receive some or much of their care outside their homes by the time they are three years old;
- Twenty-five percent will begin their lives already at risk of personal and educational failure because of the poverty and stress in their families; and
- Those at risk economically will have less opportunity to participate in high-quality early childhood programs, thus widening the chasm between the disadvantaged and those more fortunate.

For all children, and especially for the many children in peril, support for both them and their families is essential. Providing this support would not only help individual families but also would be sound national policy because of:

- Inability of children to benefit fully from their education because of poor health or lack of family stability;

- Loss of individual potential when early interventions are not available to children at crucial points in their development or to their families when experiencing distress and dysfunction;

- Cost to society of remediation, special education, welfare services, adjudication, and rehabilitiation resulting from a lack of early interventions; and

- Loss of productivity to the work force by family members who cannot work because of the lack of proper child care arrangements.

This call to action is for direct, creative, and expanded assistance to young children and their families. They would benefit directly; we all would gain.

Principles

The strategies for our call to action are based on these principles:

- All children, regardless of race, ethnic background, home language, religion, family income, disability, or gender must have equal access to high-quality early childhood programs and services.

- All families must have access to assistance that will help them a) care for and educate their children; and b) develop the skills, knowledge, and attitudes essential for family functioning.

- Early childhood programs must assist each child to develop a full range of fundamental social, emotional, physical, and cognitive abilities.

- The developmental programs of the early childhood years must be extended into and integrated with education at the elementary school level.

- Resources and programs for young children and families must be coordinated to assure availability, effectiveness, and comprehensiveness.

Strategies for Change

Health, education, social, economic, and family policy goals must be one and the same for young children. The educational and developmental aspects of such integrated policy should include these strategies.

Universally Available High-Quality Early Childhood Services for All Children With Concentration of Public Resources on Early Childhood Programs for Children at Risk

The evidence demonstrates that high-quality early childhood programs are dramatically beneficial to young children. It is not as important where programs are available, either under public or private auspices, as their accessibility to the families which need them. Parts of a fabric of early childhood education programs already exist; those parts need to be woven together to reach all who need and want to be covered.

We know that children at risk who participate in high-quality early childhood programs will increase substantially their likelihood of success in school. Yet, while families with annual incomes above $20,000 enroll their children in preschool at a rate of 52 percent, the enrollment rate for families with annual incomes below $10,000 is only 29 percent. Our society cannot afford to deny any child the opportunity to participate in a program which will have long-lasting positive benefits, both for that child and for society.

In a fragmented way, public policy already directs that the available and limited public funding for early childhood programs be concentrated on special populations, such as through Head Start and programs to reach young handicapped children. These efforts need to be blended into an overall policy to help those families most in need.

In 1987, our Council adopted the position that all four year-old children at risk of later school failure should be guaranteed an opportunity for pre-kindergarten programs through public funding. Ideally, these programs would be available by the age of three. Pre-kindergarten programs should be accompanied by publicly supported child care to assure full-day attention where needed. The providers of pre-kindergarten programs may be multiple—public and private agencies—with the overall governance of public funds under the direction of the appropriate state and local education agencies.

Strengthening Capacities of Families

The family is the focal point in fostering and sustaining a child's positive growth and development. The family "curriculum" in the earliest years is more important than the school curriculum. However, increasing numbers of families need assistance in providing experiences which lead to positive development of children.

Developing attitudes, values, and expectations and learning to succeed in school are not separate entities for young children—they are pieces of the total nurturing and care they receive at home and away from home. The results of the best programs for young children are only in part increases in their cognitive skills. The stronger result is in the positive effects on their families. In the long run, this will have a greater impact on a child's life chances than higher school test scores. Many families need help in developing their capacities, including:

- Programs that reach new parents—particularly at the prenatal period through age two—to establish early, supportive partnerships to help their children;

- Support in fulfilling family roles at home, with appropriate strategies such as home-based programs for families of the very young and networking for families of older children;

- Assurances that the patterns and scheduling of formal schooling, once it begins, will be consonant with the

experiences that have benefitted their children in early childhood programs; and

- Sensitivity to the culture of the family, with full recognition of the desire and ability of families to help their children.

Assuring Standards of Quality For Early Childhood Programs

The positive effects of high quality programs for young children and their families are so strong and consistent as to be powerfully convincing. Public policy must incorporate the best of what we know about caring for and educating young children by requiring high standards of quality.

Children who view themselves as competent, worthwhile individuals are more likely to experience success in life than those who do not. Educators can help children feel worthwhile by providing supportive learning environments which build upon the individual child's strengths and by recognizing the different learning rates and styles of children. Because young children learn best through active manipulation of the environment, concrete experiences, and communicating with peers and adults, programs must be designed to emphasize these elements.

Basically, quality programs require:

- A child development approach that exemplifies what is known about how very young children learn in an environment uniquely fashioned to their needs for physical, emotional, social, and intellectual growth;

- Staff prepared for the special field of early childhood education and benefitting from networks and supervision that provide constant renewal;

- Adult-child ratios appropriate for the age and needs of the child and meeting standards established in the child development field;

- A length of program day and year and the provision of

a continuous learning environment matched to family need; and

- Evaluations, both of programs and the progress of individual children, that are based on developmental goals and reflective of the uniqueness of early childhood education.

Where a child is educated or cared for in a formal arrangement outside the home, minimum standards of safety and program suitability must be required. Even more important, however, are standards of quality set through informed and bold public policy which will lead to success for all children.

Broad and Deep Collaboration for Comprehensive Services to Young Children and Families

Initiatives for interagency collaboration on early childhood programs exist in almost every state, either from the impetus of federal programs or state executive directive. States and localities should build upon those initiatives. Interagency and intergovernmental forums should be used to further attract attention and support of the public and policymakers, to establish clear goals and solutions for children's needs, to implement services jointly, and to provide continual evaluation of progress.

Families need more help than ever in connecting to multiple social services. While local, state, and federal resources are available, access to them often is difficult for those families most in need. By working with other resource providers, schools have a unique opportunity to help make these connections. Cooperation must be required in statutory provisions, and funds must be provided to assure it works.

Conclusion

Our nation critically needs to strengthen its public commitments to young children and families so that they may ad-

just to the demands and stresses of changed social and economic conditions.

The Council of Chief State School Officers made a commitment in 1987 to assure each student the full range of opportunities for successful graduation from high school. To fulfill that commitment, the Council called for the establishment of 11 state guarantees for at-risk children and youth, including provision of early childhood and parent education programs. The Council believes the single most important investment to be made in education is the provision of high-quality programs for the nation's youngest children, especially for those who are most at risk and for their families. This investment must be accompanied by strategies for strong standards of quality and the assurance of broad and deep collaboration among agencies at each governmental level and across levels.

Chief state school officers are ready, state by state, and nationwide, to join with families, colleagues, policymakers, and the public to implement these strategies. Our children will bring joy and pride to themselves, their families, and their country only to the extent to which we help them do so. For our society to neglect or shortchange their potential and their opportunity is intolerable. We must act together, now.